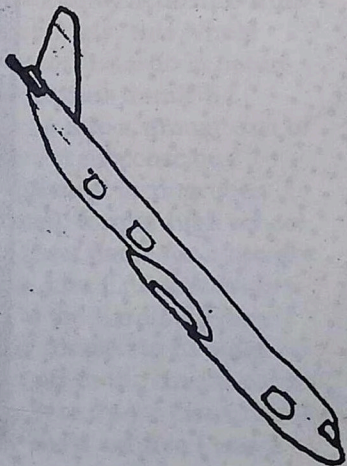
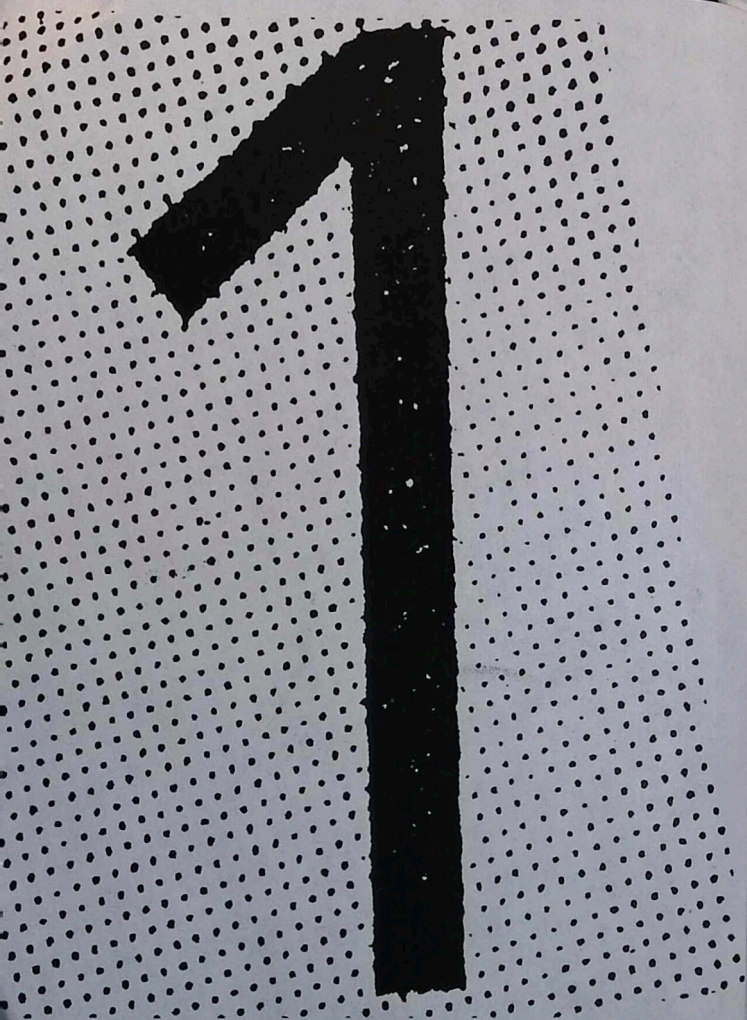


natural

disasters





In a dream,

I found myself back on the street in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, suddenly, reeling around disoriented, unable to face up to the idea of being back in town, horrified at the prospect and dreading the long walk from the downtown to the suburbs, to the now dilapidated, rejected-set-of-a-Stanley-Kubrick-film mansion I lived in (and, distressingly, this whole house aspect of the dream was not fantastic in nature, but my actual, grudging waking-hours domicile). Wandering down the street, I ran into a strange cast of unlikely residents of the permanent subconscious character catalog- the oddest and most incongruous being Lisa Crabtree (actual name), former high school home room wallflower, and a great name for a literary character if ever there was one. Lisa Crabtree hadn't seen me since graduation day at the Carolina Friends School, but she was surprisingly pleased to run into me (which should have tipped me off to the dream-nature of my surroundings- I'm pretty sure that if Lisa Crabtree saw me on the street in reality she'd act like I was a

raving lunatic screaming about transmissions received from the Mothership, keep her eyes locked straight ahead and hope she could pass by unobtrusively). She engaged me warmly in small talk. "How are you doing?" she asked.

I began trying to formulate some upbeat-sounding account of my life and current European vacation situation, but as I articulated it, it dawned on me forcibly that, in fact, I was standing on the street in Chapel Hill and not in Europe at all. *I'm supposed to be on tour with a band in Germany*, I thought. *What's going on?* Indeed, all of my best-laid (and month-spanning) plans had foiled themselves somehow, and the creeping tendrils of panic began to crawl into my consciousness. Lisa sidetracked the oncoming fit nicely by remarking, "Oh, yes! You're still with [Jolanta Lazarczyk, name chosen at Random from Chicago white pages] I take it?"

The name, though vaguely familiar, stumped me for a moment, but then I realized that she was referring to my girlfriend from home room, twelfth grade, at the Carolina Friends School. "Oh, her." I said, "No, she hates me now."

"Oh." This appeared to puncture some long-held romantic archetype of Lisa's.

"It's not my fault, though," I felt compelled to assure her, "She went off the deep end. I did barely anything wrong." This last part delivered in a confidential just-between-you-and-me whisper. An uncomfortable silence ensued.

I wandered on, towards the accursed house. As I walked, I passed a veritable parade of every girl I've ever had a crush on in Chapel Hill, noticing, as if the scales had peeled from my eyes, the complete and remarkable lack of anything noteworthy or exceptional about any of them.

This depressed me enough to decide to take public transit home. There was a bus stop conveniently located, and a city bus arrived shortly (in Chapel Hill, North Carolina- and still it somehow evaded me that this was a dream). I boarded the bus, which began the long, winding crawl down Laurel Hill Road and towards the golf-course and retirees. Halfway down the hill, Ingo Ebeling, harried organizer of our European tour, suddenly popped his head up from where he had apparently been hiding in a crouched position in the seat in front of me.

"Al, come back to Germany," he pleaded. "Finish the tour. What are you doing back in North Carolina?"

I had no idea, but I was most assuredly not thrilled to be home. There was nothing I would have liked better than to oblige his request. Still, I felt hesitant.

"I'd like to come back, but won't that be kind of expensive? I mean, getting another plane ticket, and on such short notice and all- who's going to finance all this extravagance?" I asked.

"It doesn't matter," Ingo insisted, on the verge of tears. "I've already lost so much. *I've already lost so much.*"

I agreed to try and get back to Europe. To this end, I got back off the bus and began wandering through the woods in search of a travel agent. Eventually, my wanderings led me to a quaint suburban neighborhood.

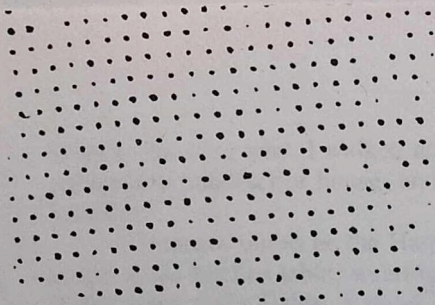
Without knowing why, I walked across the lawn of one particularly nondescript house, and entered without knocking.

It turned out to be the Harold's house. He was seated at the kitchen table, wearing only boxer shorts and a "wife-beater" style T-shirt. I stood in the doorway, speechless. He got up, walked over to me, also without a word, reached out his hand, palm extended forward, and patted me on the solar plexus, looking at me with weary sadness but smiling as if to indicate both forgiveness for past sins and the acknowledgement, simultaneously, that they were in fact sins and thus unforgivable.

I sat down on the couch, and Harold, in an uncharacteristically juvenile mood, attempted to cheer me out of what he had intuited was my distressed state of internal affairs.

"Your whole life is ahead of you. Yes it is! Who knows what you'll do," He cooed at me, as if I were an infant, putting his face close to mine and pinching my cheeks for added effect.

Just then, the landlord arrived to announce that he was evicting Harold. In tow were some prospective future renters. The landlord and the potential tenants caught Harold cradling me like a small child on the couch, cooing to me in his wife-beater, and their faces were frozen in comic horror, as if this were the freeze-framed finale in the last scene of a sit-com. Harold and I both started cracking up so uncontrollably at this that my shaking from laughter actually woke me up.



2

Finally

had that nervous breakdown that's been impending; in Antwerp, Belgium, waking up this morning on the floor, catatonic with inertia. I could not think of a reason to move, to get up, to live. Stare at the ceiling, crushed. Have you ever considered visiting Antwerp? The thought had never crossed my mind, I must confess, much less the idea that I might one day have an emotional/ mental collapse in such a strange locale.

Breakfast consists of coffee and hash. Peter, staring at me from behind the monumental breakfast joint, scowls. "Are you always this happy in the morning? Or did someone's mother die?" Coffee only adds to the impending feeling of oncoming heart attack. Joris is explaining to me how he quit smoking cigarettes by smoking pot instead. "At first I'd smoke 20 or 30 joints a day, but eventually I cut down to a reasonable amount," he recounts. "I knew a guy who did that in high school," I recall. "He managed to quit smoking, but he also flunked out of school within a week." My mind wanders back: Matt Libby, who befriended me in ninth grade. He had a "hot rod" type car; in fact, it was in his car that I had my one and only "Dukes of Hazzard" style car-jumping-off-a-ramp-while-the-people-within-go-"Yeeeeeeeeehaw!" experience, which, if the mass media is informing me correctly, is actually a very common and formative part of growing up Southern. I also heard the song Stairway to Heaven in his car for the first time. "What the hell is this?" I asked. "You've never heard fucking Stairway to heaven by Led fucking Zeppelin?" he asked, and started laughing uncontrollably at the improbability of this. "Ha ha ha ha," he said, the hot rod hitting another ramp, metamorphosing his "ha ha ha's" into a "ha ha ha yeeeeeeeeeeeeee-ha!"

The ironic part of Joris' tale, though, is that Europeans generally roll their joints with lots of tobacco, so that smoking 20 joints actually amounts to smoking a pack of cigarettes laced with pot. "Quitting smoking, as you're defining it," I clarify, "is actually continuing to smoke, but putting dope into your cigarettes too." "No, no," Joris shakes his head, "these are not cigarettes, they're joints." I give up the train of argument. What's the use? This is so typical of the

European party program, where even denying yourself a vice is a vice. Well, I have no time to ponder this further. I've got a nervous breakdown to contend with. I head out the door and start walking downtown, trying to tune out the monologue of darkness which plays on endless morbid repeat in my brain as I trudge along. Thanks to the pot this morbid monologue now has reverb on it. Otherwise it's about the same as ever, same themes and panicked inflection, sounding a lot like the final cassette retrieved from the black box in the plane wreckage, wherein the captain details his plans to now send the plane into a nose dive, and then walk the aisle slitting the passenger's throats on the way down. This is not the sort of interior monologue you want to wake up on the floor to, much less breakfast with Belgians to. It's the kind of endlessly looping cassette which does no one any good, and should be taped over post haste, to be replaced by old Devo albums or something, anything, if only such home taping of the internal endless loop tapes were possible.

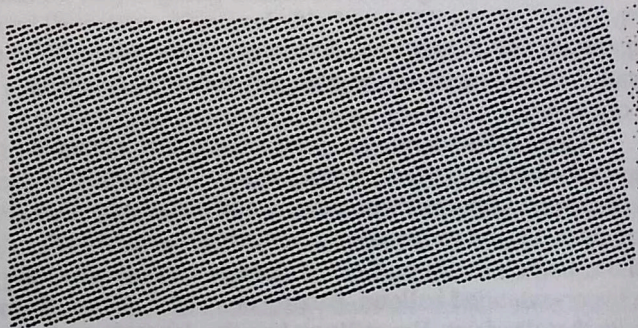
I find a small park to sit in, with an adjoining playground and a nearby sports field. On the field a game of American baseball is in progress. The players are in full team uniforms, the umpire even yelling in accented English-Americanisms for added authenticity. On the playground two twin girls, dressed identically in black tops and red pants, 11 or 12 years old, swing on the swing set in unison, legs pumping the air like choreographed ballet. Boys nearby kick around a soccer ball in muddy sweat pants and shirts, while barely teenage girls in incongruously fashionable (for the mud, for the early hour) outfits and fake plastic pearls smoke real, adult-dosage cigarettes, leaning against a fence watching the boys kick

around the ball, feigning disinterest and a grace and wisdom beyond their years. They probably learned it off the TV, or off of billboard pouts. The world comes more and more to mirror our elaborate fantasy-construct of it, as we come to believe in and acclimate ourselves to the fantasy construct. And is that such a bad thing, really? We obviously want the fantasy, somehow: after all, we constructed it. Everyone knows Seventeen magazine is for 14 year olds. Everyone knows the high school seniors on Beverly Hills 90210 are actually about 27 years old; you can see their receding hairlines. But we throw ourselves in to the fantasy, become in the process bad carbon copies of phantom ideals. When a teenager bases their identity on mimicking a 27 year old who's mimicking a teenager, what does that mean for the social fabric of the western world, and what about if it's Belgian teenagers wearing fake pearls and mimicking the motions of culturally imperialist American exported entertainment programming?

In a corner by the baseball field there is a dilapidated little wooden hut, a dingy little bar. There are old people in there- parents? Perhaps the parents of the baseball players, retired here to while away the afternoon, with no interest in the game or the rickety, rotted bleachers. They have monstrous, foamy cups of piss-yellow beer in their hands, or resting on table-tops- the great equalizing, pacifying panacea of the colder climes, a calorie-intensive depressant which induces sluggishness and preoccupation with emptying the bladder, also a pleasant feeling of general doomed acceptance. A retardant and barbiturate, a foamy bad mood and reclining, slumped posture: resolutions to scrap the lists and scratch out

the important phone numbers, disconnect the neural circuitry and melt into an uneasy union with grit-encrusted couch or floor or bar stool.

These adults have non-ironic mustaches. They wear burlap-sack-shaped clothing, sitting upright in uncomfortable seats or slumped forward with elbows and occasional chins on the counters. I stand in the doorway, staring in, but cannot, somehow, breach the force-field of despair which pushes out, like a hyper-extended balloon, barring my way. I guess I'm not quite that dead yet, I'm still stuck in the doorway, on the threshold, wedged between the people with their chins on the counter in defeat and the young overachievers kicking the soccer-ball around mindlessly and uselessly, not even playing a game or following rules, moving towards no goal other than muddying themselves as thoroughly as possible.... and those icy teenage starlets survey the scene with calculated and contrived coldness, trying to fill their lungs with adulthood, trying to read some cliff-notes manual of world-weary cynicism, to find the quickest possible route for derailing the train of youth and making it into the wooden hut. An airplane stitches two parallel white lines across the sky overhead, and below the idyllic game, the clunk of bat on ball, the anywhereness of the scene, a small park surrounded by a semi-circle of garish and dilapidated seventies-architecture apartment buildings, airplane in the sky, a tiny silver sliver against the impassive perfect eye-shadow blue.



3

In a dream,

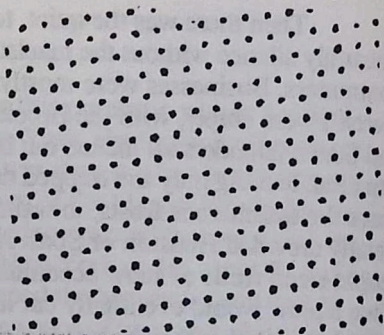
the city had been snowed in to the tops of the skyscrapers, so that you could walk on the ice, hundreds of stories up, between the roofs and towers. I was walking with the girl I was dating and we were wearing snowshoes, taking a leisurely stroll through what had once been the sky. I thought it was amazing and beautiful; she pointed out that the vast and supernatural snow-fall had happened over night, and most of the population of New York City were now trapped in their apartments, stuck miles below, entombed in an icy darkness. Oh, yeah, that sucks, I said, sympathetically. I wondered if their phones still worked, so that they could perhaps call one another. I wondered, also, whether their TVs still got reception. Miles under the ice were they watching the national news report on the disaster of their existence? Were they perhaps tuned in to aerial view helicopter camera shots of the buried, flattened city, watching the two tiny figures in parkas and snow-shoes make their way between world trade centers on foot?

Shortly after having this prophetic vision, I visited the girl of my dreams in New York, she broke it off with me, and, as fate would have it, I was then stuck in her apartment for three more days on account of the biggest blizzard in the city's history, which happened to descend that weekend. An average year of snowfall in New York yields about 23 inches of snow; as I was being dumped the heavens gurgitated 30 inches onto Manhattan in the space of two days, shutting down the airports, bus terminals, all bridges in and out of the city, much of the electricity and municipal services, and stranding me in the exact most awkward one-bedroom-with-kitchenette I could possibly be in, given the circumstances. Oh well. In such situations one makes the best of things. Despite the fact that the news reports detailed how even 911 calls would not be responded to during the city-wide crisis, it was still possible to order Chinese food, delivered by young guys on bicycles, pedaling their way across the arctic desolation.

Those three days were probably the most productive period of post-nuclear war apocalypse fantasizing I've had in my entire life. The bad dream came true in the form of an extended vacation in a waking dreamscape: New York City was transformed, unrecognizable. We walked the streets of the bizarre and alien ghost metropolis, white-washed of its gray, trash-strewn shell, looking pristine as the bleached ruins of an ancient, obliterated civilization.

Then there was the quiet: total lack of traffic noise, unearthly silence without the maelstrom of cars and commuters. Businesses were mostly closed, and the ones that weren't were empty, with the Brooklynites, Jerseyites, Long and Staten Islanders all locked out by the dysfunctional bridge situation, leaving only the trapped neighborhood residents to brave the treacherous frosts, to walk down the center of usually crowded Houston or Sixth Avenue, marveling at the people-sized walls of snow accumulating along the side-walks when a plow would eventually cut its way through, burying parked cars so that they became igloo shaped lumps of ice with antennae poking up like flags of surrender. You'd walk along in silence and emptiness, the landscape bereft of any other living thing. Up ahead you might see someone poke their head around a corner, from a distance, another arctic explorer. They'd see you, and turn around to sprint away in the other direction, like a startled deer.

4



I made out with a dog today.

On all fours in the street in Kreuzberg. It waddled up and started licking my face and I licked it back and before long, we were french kissing. Well, it was less like kissing, actually, and more akin to frantically licking each others' faces. But I'd like to meet a human that kissed that way.

The tour is over and I'm hanging around Berlin and freaking out. This morning I managed to sleep one hour at Melanie's apartment, after which I got up, drank three pots of coffee, listened to my one tape (hot snakes), and then rode the train over to her work. In the foyer of the tattoo shop, I drank another pot of coffee, listened to the hot snakes tape again (I'm just using it as a form of self-torture at this point), and then realized that—well, that I wasn't going to be able to take it. In a panic, I scurried out and began a brisk walk around the block. I bought a bottle of wine and a beer. Drank the beer, bought another beer. Felt better, although guilty and pathetic for being drunk on a bright, oppressively glaring Friday afternoon in Berlin. Wallowing on the ground in a stupor of remorse and self-loathing, the dog had waddled up and the make-out, though brief, has renewed my confidence and spirits.

Staggering around the street, I run into a guy Melanie introduced me to; we start making conversation. We're sitting on a stoop as I point out girls drunkenly. "Look! That girl has matching blue shoes and a blue bicycle. She probably PLANNED that outfit."

"Is that what's important to you?" asks the guy. "You appreciate fashion and exterior beauty?"

"Well, sure, I suppose," I say.

"Man, I'm only about one thing," the guy answers, "Love."

He's totally seen through my ladies man routine, I think. "Oh, yeah," I agree emphatically. "That's one of my main current themes as well."

"Yeah, and for me love is about one person and one person only," he says.

"Yeah, you're right," I concede. "It's true- I'm in the same boat, and I can't get over her. She's driving me crazy. I'm obsessing. I can't sleep, I can't eat--"

"One name and one name only, man." He says, "Love's name is--"

"Her name is —" I'm about to yell out her first, middle and last name, testify it to the streets, the stray dogs, the whole sordid and seamy continent.

"That name is Jesus Christ," my pal on the stoop says, serenely. "The one that died on the cross."

"OH," I say, disappointed. "That whole thing. Man, I'm trying to talk about girls here."

He goes into his boring Jesus spiel. I egg him on for a little while, mainly to practice my German and social skills in case I have the chance to converse with any more people with really nice matching outfits later.

It's getting dark. The sky is totally falling. Goetterdaemmerung. Armageddon. Mind melt. The untranslatable German word *Liebeskummer*, which sounds so cool in German but in English translates into "Love Trouble" which sounds like a bad metal band.

5

When I got back to North Carolina from New York City, I was depressed as hell. I had a very good living situation going on for that- no job, very few friends, only the most tenuous and already doomed-sounding future plans, and not even an actual place to live. I was staying on the floor in Nick Holzgum's room, an unsavory fate and a definite demotion after experiencing apocalyptic sensations in a major metropolis. The couch at Holzgum's was already taken, by a guy named Dave, who usually lived in a van parked in the driveway, but I suppose had made his way in because it was getting cold. Dave shared the couch with Mr. Lunch, a dog who, as the old expression goes, "thought he was people." I had never really understood that phrase until I observed Mr. Lunch in action, and realized that he truly did not understand the difference between himself and the human beings he consorted with. Lunch would sit on the couch with his haunches thrown back, in the best canine approximation of biped posture, and listen intently to the conversations being carried on between the motley assortment of housemates, free-loaders and living-room dwellers, seeming as attuned to the conversation as anyone in attendance. He'd prick up his ears and his head

would turn eagerly from speaker to speaker, as if he didn't want to miss a salient point in the repartee, although of course in Lunch's mind, the whole process was nothing more than a series of random bursts of gibberish being yelped back and forth. Eventually you could almost see him thinking, "hey, I can do this-" he'd get up the gumption, straighten up as best he could, and throw his own gibbered two cents in. Mr. Lunch would interject weird (but actually uncannily human-sounding) yelps into the conversation, at the appropriate "yeah, man," or, "word, bro" type spots. It was eerie. You could have filmed the dog and put in subtitles and convinced someone that the dog was speaking.

Lunch's yelps didn't have much going on in the way of content, but at least he was trying. I remember, actually, doing something similar as a very small child when my parents and their friends would have dinner parties and talk about politics. I'd cross my leg in imitation of my dad, and attempt to interject something like, "yes, quite. It's an outrage. I tell you," even though I had no idea what anyone was talking about. It seemed like everyone else was nodding and crossing their legs and saying that things were an outrage. Nonetheless, the adults would all crack up when I did it, and I never understood why. So, in that sense, I had sympathy for Mr. Lunch. He was just trying to fit in.

Within a day or two of moving into Holzgum's room, I accidentally set my sleeping bag on fire, by leaving it near a halogen lamp. We were going out to get some coffee in the morning and, in the hallway outside his room, I noted the

burning, electrical-fire smell. "What is that?" I had asked. "I don't know," Holzgum grimaced. "But it's giving me a headache. Let's get some coffee right away, and in a couple of hours when the headache is gone and we're both a little more lucid and thinking clearly we'll come back and fix whatever the problem is." I agreed on this plan of action, and we departed.

Upon returning, we found the smoldering sleeping bag had erupted into a small bonfire, which apparently had blazed unattended in the center of Nick's room for several hours. Nick's housemates, sitting around the television in the living room, had noted the burning smell during our absence. "We lit some incense, dude," they explained.

By some miracle the entire house had failed to burn down, and the fire, once discovered, was extinguished quickly, with only my sleeping bag and various of Holzgum's personal artifacts sustaining significant damage. The synthetic plastic carpet on his floor had failed to ignite, instead melting into a hard black crater in the middle of the floor. My sleeping bag had also melted more than burned; I cut out the charred section and re-sewed it into a lopsided bag now only comfortable for sleeping if the occupant was missing a leg. Despite the surgery on the smoldered areas, the sleeping bag still smelled like burnt hair or melted action figure, an odor which I was never quite able to rid it of.

Just as I was settling in at Nick Holzgum's house, the blizzard I thought I had outrun in NYC decided to swing south and avalanche the Carolinas. It didn't take anyone by surprise this time- days before the glimmer of a cloud in the sky, local news meteorologists were already announcing Ragnarok,

advising the citizens of the Triangle area to stock up on batteries and canned goods. In North Carolina, inclement winter weather is treated with the approximate seriousness of a declaration of war from an intergalactic foe. By the time the storm warnings had segued into human interest stories about a man who could eat his weight in hot dogs in Garner, NC, batteries within a fifty mile radius of Nick's house were sold out. Canned goods and bottled water were gone by the time local sports wrap-up was being aired; one had to wonder whether the local news anchors had any form of collusion with the Powers That Be at Harris Teeter.

But I had seen the storm that was headed our way, and I could testify that it was a motherfucker. Also, I knew that North Carolina had nothing in the way of plows and related anti-frost arsenal—which meant that nature simply took its course in situations like this. A bad storm in New England might result in a cancelled day of school, but in North Carolina a storm like the one coming would probably cancel the ninth grade for that year.

For people living in the country, this was no joking matter. It was conceivable that roads into town could be blocked for weeks. There were two options available to these people: journey into town, stand in borderline-rioting mobs of panicked shoppers, fighting for canned goods and bottled water in the madhouse that had once been a civilized Harris Teeter, and then return home, fully provisioned, to await the storm, which might sever phone lines, bar roads, and otherwise spell the end of human contact until the spring thaw.... OR: drive into town and crash at Nick Holzgum's house.

The night before the ice storm was scheduled to hit, people began swarming into Nick's already crowded to capacity living room. No one wanted to be stuck alone. Even people who lived only a few blocks away seemed to be getting skittish about the possibility of being too thoroughly buried to open the front door and make the trek down the street to the neighbors. The hordes kept arriving, wave after wave, like invading Vikings. Somehow Holzgum's house had become the official life raft, the designated cabin where the cabin fever and cannibalism was scheduled to go down. I sat in the living room and watched people march in, one after the other, each person bringing an offering of survival provisions, invariably either beer or drugs. The mood was giddy and jovial- clearly the expectation was that this would be one of the funnest natural disasters in recent memory.

This cramped my mope-heavy style of the time quite a bit, of course, but I had no right to complain, seeing as my ordained right to use the house on Carr Street as a life raft only pre-dated these intruders' by two days. So I sucked it up, watched the kids get loud and obnoxious as the night went on and the weather outside began to turn inclement.

Around one in the morning, as the storm was really hitting, and the Vikings inside were hitting their most barbaric party modes, I decided to walk to the Harris Teeter for a soda. Outside, it was hailing and frozen. A sheet of ice formed on my jacket, making it freeze into place, like armor. I could barely move, and the hail whipped against my face, stinging my eyes as I trudged stiff-legged through the slush, trying to keep my balance. When I got to the Harris Teeter, I found it closed. The natural disaster was on.



The insomnia is devastating, mind-blowing. Berlin is a good place for it.

I go to the Kastanienallee at 5 AM and catch the tail end of an all-night rave. It's starting to get sickly light out, the sun rising to another perma-glare unforgiving anti-climax of a day, and electronic music thunders along, obviously, unflagging and unrelenting, the two qualities I admire most in music. Punk rockers, *bekifft*, everywhere- crazy fashions, beautiful people, great outfits; Berlin is full of beautiful people. In spring, they bloom. I wonder, *is the stooper right? Am I shallow and fashion-obsessed?*

After another day and early evening of trying to beat myself into unconsciousness with alcohol, I switch tactics and try to beat myself into oblivion by overdosing on soothing herbal teas. The tea I choose even has instructions for relaxing yoga positions on the box. I drink it, follow the yoga manual, slip into a relaxing position and soon fall deeply asleep.

An hour later I bolt awake having an anxiety attack and can't get back to sleep after that. So: this is day three of not being able to sleep for more than two consecutive hours without waking up in a panic. It's starting to dawn on me that this is semi-real, that I actually do have a debilitating problem, that I can't simply say "game over" and sleep when I decide I've had enough fun hallucinating. And you can't just not sleep. I can feel the gears in my mind starting to slip.

I decide to take a walk and watch the sun rise. Berlin at this hour is desolate. Big cities are strange places to be extremely lonely in. Even when no one is out you see the tell-tell signs of cramped, co-mingling life everywhere, in the buildings and storefronts and trash and parked cars. At four AM, most everyone is tucked away in a little cube somewhere, sleeping spooned up against someone, except me, who is insane and wandering around muttering profanities to myself. This last day has been a week. I could see myself going under here. I've already noted the help wanted sign at the copy shop down the street.

Melanie tells me that the Jesus-freak's name is Gabriel, and that he got religion while on an acid trip which he has never quite come down off of. I walk into a park, thinking Oh God, Oh Christ, please don't let me start hearing any religious voices, please don't let me have any experiences with the Lord right now in my precarious mental state. That would just be unfair.

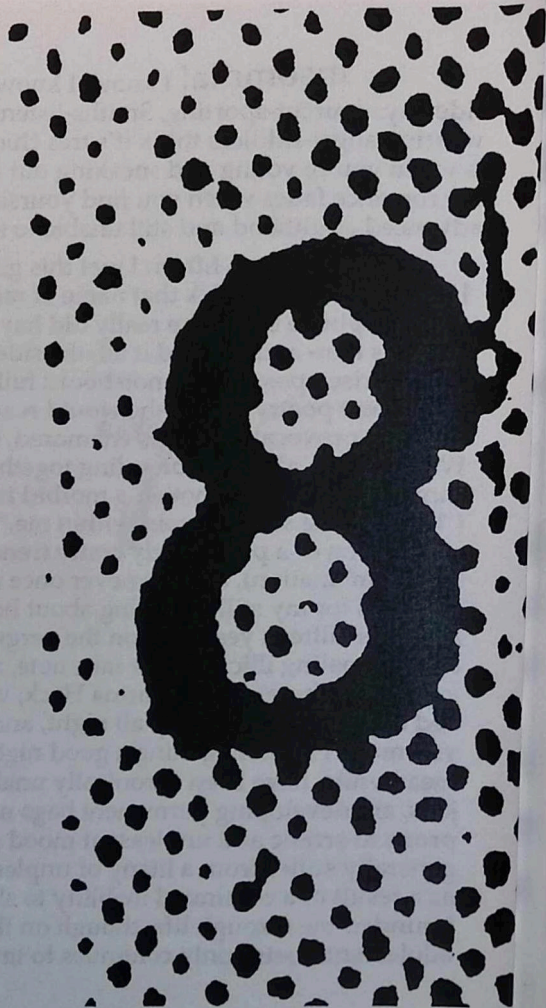
Across an expanse of field, I see a girl in a sleeping bag. She's been sleeping in the park and is now waking up as the sun explodes the sky into another day. I hear her sneeze, and then watch her sit upright and rub her eyes, running hand through greasy semi-sideways haircut and smoothing out a rumpled faux-gas station jacket. It's navy blue, and matches her sleeping bag. Nice outfit! Good morning hipsters! Rise and shine!

It looks like it will be a beautiful day. Across the field, I watch her, framed beneath the skyline, underneath the weird gleaming space syringe, the only really big and imposing thing on the horizon, the only thing placing this scene in a specific locale. The girl in the sleeping bag takes out a journal and begins scribbling in it. Sitting across from each other in the park in the early morning in faux-gas station jackets, I imagine the aerial view panorama shot, which looks amazing. I'm in the opening scene of the greatest romance movie ever made. It seems like I should go and talk to her, but I don't, on second thought, just let the moment stretch itself out into something in and of itself, disconnected from everything. Sit and wait. For whatever's coming.

7

Insomnia! I know, I know, the masses of sideways-haircut-sporting, Smiths-listening, all-black-wearing angst-riddlers think it's très chic, and maybe it is when you're young and sneaking out after curfew, but the romance fades when you find yourself well into advanced adulthood and still unable to sleep.

When I was fifteen I met this girl named Marina Heck- no, I did not pick that name at random from the Chicago phone book, she really did have a name as crazy as that- and she had it all, the sideways haircut, the Morrissey posters, the notebooks full of tortured adolescent poetry which she would read aloud at the slightest provocation. I was enamored, to say the least. We'd stay up all night, brooding together and complimenting one another's morbid fashion ensembles ("black as the soulless void within me," I recall was her summation of a particularly crafty trench-coat/combat boot combination), and we never once made out, which accounts for my still obsessing about her a decade and a half later (fifteen year-olds on the verge of consummating illicit amour take note, and I know you're out there). Well, Marina Heck, you got me out of bed and made me stay up all night, and where, I ask, are you now? Probably getting a good night's rest. I, meanwhile, have been chronically unable to hold down jobs, am developing permanent bags under my eyes, am prone to erratic and unpleasant mood swings, and generally suffer from a litany of unpleasant side effects as a result of a continued inability to sleep which has hounded me through life, though on the plus side my adolescent poetry only continues to improve.



The squat I'm at is an assemblage of small buildings with a courtyard in the center where a circus tent has been erected. Squats are apparently a relatively new thing and relatively legal in Antwerp. The weather is perfectly temperate and all manner of absolutely nutty people bustle in and out of the tent, milling and thronging in masses by small camp-fires and on benches or folding chairs. You see your common crusties, your psychedelic casualties in battered top-hat and loose-fitting clownish clothing, your shaved-headed and prodigiously pierced alternative; but there is a surprisingly high ratio of people who, in that unmistakable way you would never know you could pick out instantly until you stand next to them and pick it instantly out, are clearly super models.

And Belgians, from the most runway-ready to the most ragged, have no problem shoving you out of the way when involved in a high-density crowd situation. They jostle and bump against you as if you aren't there, offering neither excuse nor apology. The mass of super models and freaks mill and shuffle to and fro, in and out of the tent, pushing you aside if you're in their trajectory, slamming into your shoulder to get by you. I pick up on this and push people back. It's not so bad once you get into the swing of it. Peter (who I haven't seen since breakfast) careens into me eventually. I grab his shoulder. Recognizing me, he stops to chat. "I can't help but notice the proliferation of, how should I say, well, uh, super models," I say.

"Yes, it's strange," Peter nods. "All the really beautiful and intelligent women in Antwerp hang out at the squats for some reason. All the boring and unattractive people are lawyers or civil servants." He shrugs his shoulders. "It works out quite well, actually," he notes.

"Beer?" Judith, one of my Belgian guides, appears at my side, offering up a towering container of the foamy froth. Judith is tiny and perhaps the beer looks larger than it is in her impish hands. "I'm happy you could see our place," she smiles, gesturing around absently, as if she's pointing out a modestly decorated living room. I decide to enter the tent and observe the scheduled entertainment.

Inside the tent a Wheel of Fortune-style game show is being conducted on a makeshift stage, complete with gigantic spinner, a Pat Sajak-looking host who swings a mostly empty

bottle of tequila around as he MC's ferociously, screaming into a microphone and harassing bemused-to-embarrassed looking contestants, who take turns stepping up to the spinner to give it spins, which don't seem to generate any sort of effect whatsoever except to cause the audience to hoot and the tequila-sodden Pat Sajak impersonator to scream in a frenzied falsetto of excitement. Of course, the whole thing is being conducted in Belgian, so for all I know the contestants are selling their spouses into white slavery as I watch.

Next up, a DJ spins records, odd samba music to the accompaniment of which a very effeminate and somber-looking young man leads a poodle on stage to do a primped, awkwardly rigid little dance. The crowd goes wild. In the middle of this performance a super model is so moved and electrified that she rushes the stage and begins dancing with the dog. The young man pauses, then leans down and gingerly removes the leash from the poodle, and, righting himself, loops it around the supermodel's neck. A very much less primped and prissy set of dance moves is enacted between them while the audience, almost over-stimulated at this point, gapes and grins and people smash into my shoulders, pushing me out of the way to better check the whole thing out. The poodle, for his part, retreats obediently to the sidelines to look on, wide-eyed and attentive, as if trying to pick up new moves.

The music stops and the pink-jacketed MC of the party announces the next act. An either extremely drunk or autistic man with very thick glasses, three or four days of stubble, and a pot-belly hanging slightly out of a soiled T-shirt

over ill-fitting corduroy pants, takes the stage, and stands there for a few awkward moments, blinking in the glare of the stage-lights. A hush falls over the crowd. The autistic man begins soulfully crooning an a cappella slow jam which I do not recognize. But he's really good; he's basically the white autistic Belgian unshaven squatter with poor eyesight Sam Cooke, and just as that thought is sinking in, a member of the audience again rushes the stage, a six foot tall woman with a shaved head and (Peter, jostled up next to me, says) tripping on acid, yanks the microphone from his hands, and segues into her own jam. The autistic guy goes catatonic; whereas moments before he was blossoming into carnal, seethingly sexual slowjammery, it's now as if his battery has been removed. The glow in his eyes fades out. His head droops, and he stands inert except for the frenzied wringing of his hands, which twitch nervously at about groin level. The amazonian acid casualty, meanwhile, is pumping her arm in Arsenio Hall fashion, inciting the audience into chanting, "An-twerp! An-twerp! An-twerp!" She hands the mic back to the autist, and stage dives into the crowd. He resumes his jam. The audience, first two rows flattened and writhing under the delirious amazon's bulk, writhes itself back into a more or less upright position

Outside, Judith is passed out in a bush. The sun is coming up. "I went to say hello to one of my friends, standing in the corner " Peter tells me, "and when I slapped him on the back he just fell over face first." Over by the bon-fire, the Belgian super models smoke reefer as the sky turns an orange gray, marking the beginnings of a new day, the crowding out of a dreamless night.

Al Burian

